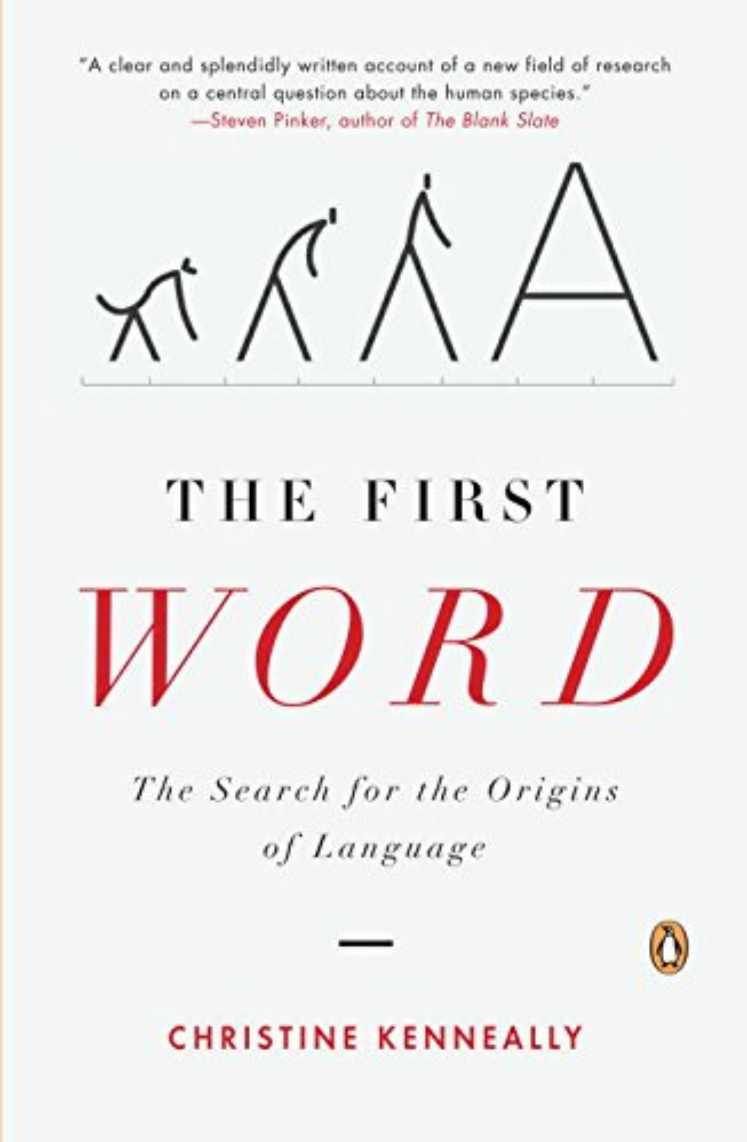
The First Word: The Search for the Origins of Language

Christine Kenneally
*ePub | *DOC | audiobook | ebooks | Download PDF*



#323663 in Books Christine Kenneally 2008-05-27 2008-05-27Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.50 x .74 x 5.50l, .72 #File Name: 0143113747368 pagesThe First Word The Search for the Origins of Language | File size: 79.Mb

Christine Kenneally : The First Word: The Search for the Origins of Language before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The First Word: The Search for the Origins of Language:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Status of LinguisticsBy Sam CollinsThe author provides a useful and interesting overview of the current directions in linguistics research. While I am in no sense scholarly competent

in the subject, I'm interested, find it a fascinating effort to understand how Homo sapiens became what we are: the most widely distributed, numerous, and ecologically dominant species of our size ever to evolve on our world. By paths yet speculative, we acquired language, our completely novel capability for communicating ideas of great complexity, novelty and applicability in the physical world as well as the purely imaginary. As children we learn this skill without apparent effort or special tutelage. Throughout life we rely on language to learn whatever we are able about our world, even ourselves, what we can do and cannot, how we relate to others and take a role in a vastly complex society of our fellows. We use language to preserve and accumulate new knowledge and to exercise the power it provides over our environment and each other. Yet few of us even think about it, let alone understand much about how language works or why only one species has it. Language capability make us unique among the uncountable multitude of species that live or have lived in the half billion years complex life forms have inhabited the earth. No one knows what circumstances in our evolution led to its development. The author does a competent job of summarizing the lines of research being followed currently to learn more its origins, about the fundamental structures of our many different languages, the neurologic peculiarities that give us the ability to use it, about our differences and similarities with other creatures more limited in their ways of communicating. Her discussion is lucid, accessible to non specialists, interestingly presented. Any reader can learn a great deal from her discussion. I recommend the book highly.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Very broad and well-written introduction to the field of studyBy SashaThe study of the origins of language, as we learn in this book, is in many ways a new field. It is a field which involves not only linguistics, but also biology, anthropology, computer science, and so on. Christine Kenneally tries to cover the specific points of contention as she reviews the field, and therefore the book is certainly not light on content. But this book is written with a very engaging style, and because it assumes very little knowledge, it is certainly accessible to us non-linguists.The book has much interesting information, and you will learn a lot about the evolution of language. It covers how the field started, and how for a long time people claimed that language just "appeared" all at once, and that it did not evolve (a view that few people hold now.) It covers how experiments have deduced facts about our brains by comparing us to apes and other animals, and how there is no a single specific "language" part of the brain. It also covers how almost all parts of the brain that facilitate language in humans are also present in apes. It is written from a mostly-neutral standpoint, presenting the theories of Pinker, Chomsky, and others without picking who is "correct" in most cases.Unfortunately, the book has some organizational issues. It jumps around, and it often delves too deeply into less interesting personal clashes among the academics. However, overall, this book is a good read, and I certainly learned a lot from it.2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. YOU'RE DOING IT NOWBy Hank NapkinA thoughtfully assembled and compelling book that surveys the evolving range of ideas about language -- without using the word "communication" too often. Not surprisingly the human sense of superiority, as it relies on language, is further and rightfully debunked by the author's meticulous review of the theories of language as its possible origins and evolution are traced from the almost creationist sounding "language organ" theories of Chomsky to the more subtle and physiologically founded theories of Pinker, all made accessible by Kenneally's keenly sequenced and objective assessments.Especially sad for a book on language are the scattered and persistent typos. In some spots sentences have been suddenly terminated -- a type of error that has grown more and more popular with the advent of word processing -- and in other passages unintentional word substitutions have been made. My favorite example occurs during a discussion of mirror genes. As if the second lower case "r" actually did mirror its predecessor and was then superimposed upon it, "mirror gene" suddenly becomes "minor gene". Another nit is the cover design which riffs on the clich visual representation of evolution, a conception which Kenneally correctly debunks in her book.Lo, packaging!But these nits are aimed squarely at the publisher, not at the author. Perhaps as the science of proofreading improves -- while that of language and its origin and evolution progress -- we can look forward to a revised edition.

An accessible exploration of a burgeoning new field: the incredible evolution of language The first popular book to recount the exciting, very recent developments in tracing the origins of language, The First Word is at the forefront of a controversial, compelling new field. Acclaimed science writer Christine Kenneally explains how a relatively small group of scientists that include Noam Chomsky and Steven Pinker assembled the astounding narrative of how the fundamental process of evolution produced a linguistic ape?in other words, us. Infused with the wonder of discovery, this vital and engrossing book offers us all a better understanding of the story of humankind.

From Publishers WeeklyThis book grows out of Kenneally's conviction that investigating the evolution of language is a good and worthwhile pursuita stance that most in the field of linguistics disparaged until about 20 years ago. The result is a book that is as much about evolutionary biology as it is about linguistics. We read about work with chimpanzees, bonobos, parrots and even robots that are being programmed to develop language evolutionarily. Kenneally, who has written about language, science and culture for the New Yorker and Discover among others, has a breezily journalistic style that is occasionally witty but more often pragmatic, as she tries to distill academic and scientific discourses into terms the casual reader will understand. She introduces the major players in the field of

linguistics and behavioral studiesNoam Chomsky, Steven Pinker, Sue Savage-Rumbaugh and Philip Liebermanas well as countless other anthropologists, biologists and linguists. Kenneally's insistence upon seeing human capacity for speech on an evolutionary continuum of communication that includes all other animal species provides a respite from ideological declamations about human supremacy, but the book will appeal mainly to those who are drawn to the nuts and bolts of scientific inquiry into language. (July 23) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. It never hurts to begin with a genius, so the author opens by declaring, "the story of language evolution studies is unavoidably the story of the intellectual reign of Noam Chomsky." Before Chomsky, linguists searched for new languages, wrote down vocabulary and grammar and compared them to other languages. They never addressed questions about the origin of language because conventional wisdom declared such questions could not be answered. Sixty years ago, Chomsky pointed out that infants learn to talk merely by interacting with those around them for a few years. Since conversation contains too little information to provide rules for this incredibly complex skill, humans must be born with the unique ability to learn to speak. This assertion galvanized a generation of researchers who turned their attention to the roots of language. Since Chomsky asserted that language is a uniquely human phenomenon, he doubted evolution played a role in its origin. So great was his influence that scientists have only recently overcome their inhibitions and turned up fascinating evidence to the contrary. Readers will blink as the author describes studies demonstrating that animals use language and can be taught more. Early, highly publicized experiments with apes gave the field a bad reputation because the animals seemed to be responding to trainers' cues, but careful studies make it clear that many animals can employ syntax and vocabulary at the level of a three-year-old human. Despite our vastly superior language abilities, researchers have yet to find any speech areas in the human brain that are not present elsewhere in the animal kingdom. Kenneally's book features a steady stream of brilliant, opinionated people expressing ideas that often contradict those of other brilliant people, but she channels this flood of frequently technical arguments into a comprehensible and stimulating narrative. Lively portrait of a fascinating new scientific field. "Kirkus" All branches of science search for origins. Biologists want to know how life on earth began. Astronomers want to know how the universe got started. Even in mathematics, questions about how different numerical systems came to be constitute a legitimate line of inquiry. Linguists are different. In the middle of the 19th century, the main professional bodies governing linguistic research formally banned any investigation into the origins of language, regarding it as pointless. The topic remained disreputable for more than a century, but in the last decade or so, language evolution has eased toward the front burner, attracting the attention of linguists, neuroscientists, psychologists and geneticists. Their search is the subject of The First Word, Christine Kenneallys lucid survey of this expanding field, dedicated to solving what she calls the hardest problem in science today. One nut to crack is the nature of language itself, and here Ms. Kenneally introduces the unignorable presence in virtually every linguistic debate, Noam Chomsky. Mr. Chomsky and his many adherents regard language as a uniquely human endowment, centered in a specific area of the brain. It gives every living person the ability, unsought, to generate infinite strings of sentences in infinite combinations. Animals, in this view, do not have language, nor do they think. The reasons that humans speak, or how language might have made itsway to the human brain, do not matter. It may simply be that in a linguistic version of the big bang, a language mutation suddenly appeared, and that was that. This view now faces many rivals. The big-bang theory has been countered by linguists who believe that just as the eye evolved to meet a need for vision, language evolved to meet the need for communication. Ms. Kenneally ushers onto the stage researchers who have discovered that many animal species possess languagelike skills previously unimagined and, without benefit of syntax or words, have a complicated inner life. They believe that the study of animal language and gestures could shed light on a possible protolanguage stage in human development. The idea that language is restricted to a specific area of the brain has been more or less discarded. Brain researchers now believe that language tasks are assigned throughout the brain. Moreover, some linguists now believe that language is a two-way street. Its not something emanating from the brain of a communicating human. It actually changes the processes of the brain. Stroke victims suffering from aphasia, a condition involving language loss, do not simply find it difficult to communicate, they also find it more difficult to categorize, remember and organize information. One of Ms. Kenneallys most intriguing scientists, Simon Kirby, a linguist at the University of Edinburgh who works with computer models, has proposed the idea that language might be a self-evolving phenomenon. Somewhat like a computer virus, it changes and adapts to survive. Ms. Kenneally, a linguist trained at the University of Cambridge, covers an enormous expanse of ground as she brings thereader up to date on developments in a wide variety of disciplines touching on language evolution. At times, she lapses into a somewhat mechanical recitation of experiments, papers and positions, which she tries to enliven, in vain, by inserting long, unedited quotations from her interview subjects that could just as well have been paraphrased. On the plus side, she explains difficult ideas concisely and clearly, and she maintains a firm grip on the steering wheel, moving the overall argument along in a straight line. Above all, she is scrupulously fair-minded. Although obviously taken with the idea of language evolution and language acquisition as a continuum seen in primitive form in other species, she gives Mr. Chomsky his due, despite his withering scorn for most of the ideas she presents, and defends him from his most vehement detractors. Best of all, Ms. Kenneally zeroes in on a host of fascinating experiments. What happens when one ape trained in sign language meets another equally proficient ape for

the first time? Not communication, it turns out. What resulted was a sign-shouting match; neither ape was willing to listen, Ms. Kenneally reports. Mr. Kirby, the computer modeler, devised an experiment in which subjects were shown objects on a screen along with words describing the objects in what was represented as an invented alien language. The subjects were asked to learn the language. In testing one student after the other, however, Mr. Kirby added new objects to the ones already shown, whereupon the subjects unthinkingly generated new words and combinations. These changes were added to the core list and passed along to successive subjects who, trying to master the language created, in part, by each of their predecessors, made their own additions and changes. Except for the initial random language given to the first subject, there was no alien language, only the contributions of each individual, which were culturally transmitted from generation to generation, Ms. Kenneally writes. Each subject in the experiment believed that he was simply giving back what he had learned, but instead the language was evolving. In similar fashion, researchers have been looking at Internet sites that generate their own protolanguages and linguistic structures. Ms. Kenneally concludes with a little experiment of her own. She asks many of the subjects she interviewed to imagine a group of infants stranded on the Galapagos Islands, provided with all the necessities of life but no access to speech. Would they create a language? How many babies would it take, what might their language be like, and how would it change over the generations? The answers range from no language to sign language to a full-fledged language in three generations. The real point is that Ms. Kenneally could gather 15 linguists willing to think about the problem. Onward to the first Neanderthal dictionary. "The New York Times" (daily)a A clear and splendidly written account of a new field of research on a central question about the human species.a aSteven Pinker, author of "The Blank Slate" a A crash course on imitation, gesture, abstract thought, and speech. . . . It is eminently worthy of attention.a a"Psychology Today" a Scientists who study the origins of language are a passionate, fractious bunch, and you donat have to be an egghead to be tantalized by the questions that drive their research: how and when did we learn to speak, and to what extent is language a uniquely human attribute? What [Kenneally] describes is fascinating.a a"The New York Times Book "A clear and splendidly written account of a new field of research on a central question about the human species. Steven Pinker, author of "The Blank Slate" A crash course on imitation, gesture, abstract thought, and speech. . . . It is eminently worthy of attention. "Psychology Today" Scientists who study the origins of language are a passionate, fractious bunch, and you don t have to be an egghead to be tantalized by the questions that drive their research: how and when did we learn to speak, and to what extent is language a uniquely human attribute? What [Kenneally] describes is fascinating. "The New York Times Book "? A clear and splendidly written account of a new field of research on a central question about the human species.? ?Steven Pinker, author of "The Blank Slate" ? A crash course on imitation, gesture, abstract thought, and speech. . . . It is eminently worthy of attention.? ?"Psychology Today" ? Scientists who study the origins of language are a passionate, fractious bunch, and you don?t have to be an egghead to be tantalized by the questions that drive their research: how and when did we learn to speak, and to what extent is language a uniquely human attribute? What [Kenneally] describes is fascinating.? ?"The New York Times Book " About the AuthorAuthor of The Invisible History of the Human RaceandThe First Word,Christine Kenneally is an award-winning journalist who has written for The New Yorker, theNew York Times, Slate, Time, New Scientist, The Monthly, and other publications.Before becoming a reporter, she received a PhD in linguistics from Cambridge University and a BA (with honors) in English and linguistics from Melbourne University. She was born and raised in Melbourne, Australia, and has lived in England, Iowa, and Brooklyn, New York.